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ASEAN Regional Forum: Protecting human rights, promoting security and stability

Amnesty International is urging the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to place human rights protection high on its agenda during next week's ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) discussions on security and stability.

"Human rights protection is the key to conflict prevention and resolution," Amnesty International said. "Human rights problems in many parts of Asia will have serious implications for regional security if they are left unchecked."

"Security is about much more than high-level diplomatic meetings. The need for people within the ASEAN region to enjoy basic human rights should be at the heart of the ASEAN Regional Forum's discussions."

Amnesty International pointed to the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Indonesian province of Aceh, heightened political violence in East Timor, recent instability in Cambodia and continuing repression in Myanmar as examples of the relationship between security and human rights.

East Timor's popular consultation process can only take place successfully if the Indonesian authorities prevent militia groups from intimidating and harassing civilians by disarming and disbanding them. They must also ensure the neutrality of the security forces and that the police are the sole agency involved in maintaining law and order. All human rights violations must also be investigated and those found responsible brought to justice.

ASEAN member states and their dialogue partners can contribute further to improving the situation in East Timor by preventing the supply to Indonesia of small arms, light weapons and other types of military, security and police equipment, including tear gas, likely to be used to commit human rights violations.

In Aceh, dozens of people have been unlawfully killed by the security forces while others have "disappeared" or been arbitrarily detained during the last six months. This has already led to the internal displacement of thousands of Acehnese and could again cause refugee outflows to neighbouring countries.

The situation in Myanmar also remains acute, despite ASEAN's claims that admitting the country as a member in July 1997 would encourage the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) to improve its human rights record .

In fact, the opposite has been true. The SPDC has stepped up its repression of the opposition party the National League for Democracy and increased forcible relocation programs of civilians from ethnic minorities. Forced labour continues at a high level.

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These violations are clearly having a negative impact on neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand, Bangladesh, and India, which have all been affected by large refugee flows. Incursions by government troops and various armed opposition groups into Thai territory have resulted in several Thai nationals being killed during the last four years.

Cambodia's political situation remains fragile; the complete failure to hold anyone responsible for the political killings of recent years may contribute to renewed problems in the years ahead. The handling of cases against former Khmer Rouge leaders will be critical to the country's future stability and development and Cambodia's regional partners should back calls for them to be tried through an international process.

Amnesty International has welcomed ASEAN's establishment of a working group on human rights and discussions on a possible regional human rights mechanism. But human rights must also find their proper place in core discussions on security and economic development -- and be addressed squarely by the ASEAN Regional Forum.

"The recent bloodshed in Kosovo is a lesson for the international community on how human rights violations are the source of serious conflict and instability, and how preventing violations is central to finding lasting solutions," Amnesty International said.

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